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Op-Ed: Abuse of prescription painkillers is deadly

By Renee Zito, Director, California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs

The abuse of prescription drugs is California's fastest-growing drug problem. Every segment of society in our state is impacted—kids as young as 10 years old, college students, parents, professionals, wealthy and middle-class, even senior citizens.

The drug of choice? Prescription painkillers. Second only to marijuana as the nation's most prevalent drug of choice, pain relievers such as OxyContin®, Vicodin®, and Percodan® are killing Californians.

This is why the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs (CDADP) is supporting the first *National Prescription Drug Take-Back Day* scheduled for Saturday, September 25. The U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration and its partner organizations will provide community drop-off sites where unused, unwanted or expired prescription and over-the-counter drugs can be disposed of safely with no questions asked and at no cost.

Our youth are especially at risk in this growing epidemic of prescription drug misuse and abuse. How does it happen that our kids are becoming addicted to drugs?

Because prescription drugs are perceived as lawful and safe, their burgeoning misuse and abuse—up some 400 percent over the last decade—has stayed below the public's radar. A Sacramento law enforcement officer commented recently that this generation of kids may have said “no” to marijuana and heroin, but they think misusing prescription medications is okay because a doctor prescribed them. The tide is turning as more stories make the headlines about people dying or suffering serious physical side effects from overdoses of prescription medicines.

The *2007-08 California Student Survey* revealed that 12 percent of ninth graders and 18 percent of eleventh graders had misused prescription painkillers at least once in their lifetime, making these substances the most popular class of illegal drugs after marijuana in these two age groups. Even more significant, the survey showed that 3 percent of ninth graders and 7 percent of eleventh graders had used seven or more times! And we expect these numbers to be higher when the 2009 survey results are available. Studies have shown that abusing prescription drugs for the first time before age 16 leads to a greater risk of dependence later in life.

The CDADP currently licenses narcotic treatment programs in California counties where the number of people admitted for addiction to pain relievers increased by more than 80 percent from 2006 to 2009. During that time period, CDADP data show that the number of full-time employed high school graduates between 18 and 25 years old addicted to prescription painkillers doubled.

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Lack of awareness of the dangers of prescription drug misuse and abuse and the availability of them are two priority issues addressed by the CDADP's California Task Force on Prescription Drug Misuse.

There is real danger in the non-medical use of prescription painkillers—and we have to get the word out. Not only are there serious health risks involved, there are severe societal consequences, too. Prescription painkillers were the motive in a recent string of armed robberies at several California pharmacies. A rising number of thefts of prescription painkillers have been reported at real estate open houses, where supposedly interested buyers tour houses and steal drugs from medicine cabinets.

Studies have shown that 60 percent of prescription drug addicts get their pills from friends or from their own doctor for legitimate needs and then misuse them for non-medical reasons. Some people resort to "doctor shopping"—seeing different doctors to get multiple prescriptions.

CDADP encourages more California doctors and pharmacists to participate in the state's prescription drug monitoring system, which provides real-time access to prescription information for doctors, pharmacists, law enforcement and regulatory agencies who sign up to access the system. By monitoring what has been prescribed for patients through patient activity reports, our medical and law enforcement professionals can better identify and deter the abuse and diversion of controlled substances.

Anyone—including children—can readily obtain, without a prescription, highly addictive controlled substances from the Internet. A staggering 89 percent of sites selling controlled prescription drugs have no legitimate prescription requirements.

We all can do something to prevent the misuse of prescription painkillers by young people and by those that we love. Take advantage of incidents in the news to talk to your family members about painkillers. Making an example out of these stories helps to discourage children from trying drugs in the first place. Become a micro-manager—if your child or aging parent is prescribed a pain-relieving medication, closely monitor the dosage and frequency that the drug is taken. Also, if someone in your house is prescribed a prescription painkiller, keep it locked up and dispose of any remaining pills properly when you no longer need it.

Check the U.S. Department of Justice/DEA website (<http://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/takeback/>) for a list of local collection sites participating in the *Prescription Drug Take-Back Day* on Saturday, September 25.

Your efforts could prevent a tragedy in your own family.

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Renée Zito was appointed Director of the California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in February 2007. In her role, she leads the state's alcohol and drug treatment and prevention efforts. She previously served as director of programs at Marin Services for Women in Marin County, where she oversaw and managed the staff for residential and outpatient programs, housing and education services, as well as the admission department. Prior to coming to California she served as executive director of Hazelden Alcohol and Drug Addiction Treatment Center in New York. She was also director of treatment at Smithers Alcoholism Rehabilitation Center of the St. Luke's/Roosevelt Hospital Center and taught at the New York State Academy of Addiction Studies and Hunter College. Zito is from San Francisco and has a master's degree in Social Work from Hunter College and a bachelor's degree from Fordham University. # # #